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Hyperreal Living: The DraxTM Files

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Abstract

This paper supports a videographic presentation of findings of research into hyperreal living, based on one of the co-authors documentary evidence from Second Life ® collated over a 15 year period. The videography is available at <https://vimeo.com/222512369>.

In this document, we consider the notion of hyperreality, examining embodiment in virtual contexts through emerging technologies and how this may challenge our understanding of reality. Drawing on the computer game as an ‘alternative mode of consciousness’, we explore the ways in which corporeal and virtual experiences interact, resulting in personas that demonstrate mixed reality living.

Key words

Hyperreality, Videography, Embodiment, Virtual Reality, Machinima

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Introduction

In this work we present an overview of the experience of hyperreal living. Based on a videographic documentation of participants in Second Life over a period of 15 years, we examine how contemporary technologies have been embodied and a sense of mixed reality has emerged for consumers through a rich combination of the material and the virtual. We first present a brief literature review, highlighting the theoretical perspective that our research has adopted.

Literature Review

Hyperreality in globalized markets is a stylized and romanticized consumption space, where material space is sanitized or emphasized in some meaningful way (Belk, 1996). Whilst, consumers may easily distinguish between the real and the hyperreal, many prefer the hyperreal as a means to engage with their 'idealized' world space (Eco, 1983). With the advent of the mass consumption of computer games, hyperreality has become focussed on simulacra, adopting Baudrillard's (1981) perspective of the substitution of the material world and suggesting a binary state related to 'being in the world' (after Heidegger). Reality and what is 'real' is a fundamental premise increasingly being contested (see the Royal Academy of Arts' Virtually Real exhibition in London, January 2017). What may be thought of as real in marketing is questioned: for example, currency markets have been described as 'illusionary' (Cloke, 2009) and financialization as 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2005), where 'real virtual' experiences may take shape (Royrvik and Brodersen, 2012).

Baudrillard (2005) provides a basis for considering the boundaries between the real and the virtual, referring to computer games as being a system of objects that may be imbued with intentionality to perform functions, create atmosphere and facilitate player agency as a coherent whole. These are signs that may be objectively or subjectively interpreted and experienced, but where a sense of nostalgia (regressive thought) is evoked when reality is replaced with pure simulation (Baudrillard, 1981; Heineman, 2014). Computer games, however, have become massive persistent environments, extending far beyond a playful encounter that may itself render a first person perspective of some imaginary, fictional or realistic interaction. Such environments create a sense of 'worldliness' of their own, where the space-time continuum is not story driven per se but created by social actors within it. This 'media reality' is explained by Kosmaly (2012) as an alternative 'mode of consciousness' where authenticity of the media and its perception plays a crucial role in its acceptance as reality that, in turn, is responsible for the communication (distribution) of knowledge (McLuhan's, 1964, 'medium is the message').

Moreover, in considering sports and computer games, Crawford (2015) argues the game is a 'themed space' similar to other themed yet material spaces such as Disneyland, albeit a 'non-space'. These kinds of spaces offer consumers an opportunity to create an individual experience that may not wholly simulate the focal sport but merely some aspects of it, such as features of players, mimicked gameplay, etc. (Bogost, 2013). Importantly, they provide a sense of control and a mechanism for social engagement (Crawford, 2015). Kingsepp (2007) highlights in his consideration of World War II and computer games that the reality to which players subscribe may

be immersive and evocative of a sense of presence in a context that is historically accurate but it is referentially lost, or disconnected from reality. The game is a simulation of a war that took place over 70 years ago, beyond the experience and direct memory of the player. Such games may provide authentic and transcendental experiences of the War that are real to the player but not real 'in reality' (Ryan, 2001). Kingsepp (2007) suggests this is an example of a 'second order experience', suggesting there is a lack of complete sensory experience (for example, death is missing), and therefore the experience is mythical, 'carnavalesque' (Bakhtin, 1984) and without distasteful side effects (Zizek, 2002). Consequently, the boundaries between what is real and virtual may be notionally tied to experience and context, albeit perhaps simpler than reality.

As intimated, the sites of agency increase with each new generation of technology. A case in point is augmented reality where the material is overlaid with virtual information, described as a "layered engagement in which multiple levels of presence and world may exist" (Coleman, 2011:146). Coleman (2011) goes on to refer to X-reality as a fused or mixed reality experience, based on a continuum of exchanges between virtual and material spaces, representing a diversity of network combinations through pervasive media. Whereas agency is the experience of causing actions and events in the world (Wegner, 2004), presence and co-presence are terms that reflect the multi-sensory experience (psychological and physical) of 'being there' with others in a social context (eg., Yu, Mortensen, Khanna, Spanlang and Slater, 2012; Pritchard, Zopf, Polito, Kaplan and Williams, 2016). Hence, whilst research has tended to focus on the possibilities of human sensory perception in virtual spaces, there is little research on the social constructions of how people 'live' mixed reality lives.

Videographic Presentation

In this videographic work, we therefore explore hyperreality by drawing on findings from evaluations of longitudinal research into machine-cinema ('machinima', for a definition and summary overview, see machinima.dmu.ac.uk/). We do this using excerpts from a machinima documentary series produced over a period of 15 years by one of our co-authors. Machinima is a creative practice that employs 3D computer video games to derive new embodied experiences, stories and performances (Coleman, 2011). Our overview highlights a continuing embodiment (Biocca, 1997) of game-based culture (Plante, 2016). The research reflects the mass development and adoption of the wealth of emergent entertainment technologies such as virtual reality, haptics and social networking media, which provide opportunities for multi-sensory interactions.

Consumers have sought to adapt their experiences in virtual spaces such as games in meaningful ways in order to create identities involving brands that resonate with communities and trends in which the cultural practice takes shape. Embodiment is the process through which consumers engage in facilitated or mediated social interaction (Kristensen, 2002), mixing their own reality with a virtual reality realized through avatars. This is not a straight-forward process where the virtual is 'worn' like a set of clothes but it is interactive, where material and virtual characteristics influence each other (Stojnic, 2015) at an existential level (Baudrillard, 1981). The technological advances in vast virtual environments enable shared experiences in real time and also make co-presence increasingly realistic through corporeal

communication (Klevjer, 2012). The adaptations made by consumers in such time-space environments reflect growth and change as co-created beings. Consumers have fused their identity with that of virtual personas they have created or which have been provided by game brands (see for example Linden Lab's Second Life®). At times these new personas overcome challenges faced in the material world such as age, mobility and physical limitation and at other times, these explore imaginary experiences (Boellstorff, 2008), representing a new mode of intentional agency.

Concluding remarks

The video illustrates the apparent transparency of media technologies and the extent of multi-media literacy of participants. The technologies evidently facilitate a process of embodiment that evokes a psychophysical response. The adaptations made by consumers in the space-time continuum reflect a complex interaction between their material and virtual experiences. The result is an authentic mixed reality that enables participants to grow their personality beyond a simple augmented experience.

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